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FENG YU-LAN DISCUSSES
RESULTS OF A YEAR'S LEARNING

(Chinese Editor's Note: Feng Yu-lan is a famous professor of philosophy in Ch'ing-hua University, author of well-known works on history of Chinese philosophy, etc. During the war an ardent supporter of Chiang, he has now changed).

Pei-p'ing was liberated a year ago, and during this time China has undergone a tremendous transformation. Both society and the individuals are in the process of change and progress. Looking back over my experience in learning this year, I feel that I have made a little progress, namely, in recognizing that before this I was not making progress.

A month ago, some visitors from Honan were discussing a place where no land reform had occurred and where there were still some persons who did no work, life going on comfortably as usual. It was not at ease over this injustice. Afterwards I mused that this is probably the beginning of a change in viewpoint. When I visited that part of the country on the occasion of my mother's death, (I had been away 20 years), my friends and relatives were still a part of the landlord class with no basic change in all these years. The standard of living of those landlords, while lower because of the war, was still that of income without labor. But at that time I had no impression of injustice. It is evident that then, although I had lived by teaching for more than 20 years, yet because of my birth my feelings still leaned toward the landlord class.

Before the liberation I did not know there was such a thing as class feeling. Only later did I discover it and come to believe that one must have definite feelings toward a certain class before he can adopt the viewpoint of that class. Although before this I did not consider myself particularly unintelligent, and had at times considered myself "leftist," yet in real feeling I still leaned toward the landlords. This was the basis of my former viewpoint.

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This viewpoint determined my actions. During the war of resistance to Japan, when the Kuomintang was calling me so that I could not flatly refuse, I took an equivocal attitude, thinking to stay out of politics and stick to learning and education as such. As I see it now, all that was self-deception. In truth not to stay out was to stay in. In the revolutionary period after the war, I thought earnestly about changing my former incorrect line, but failed to take a definite stand. Of course that was determined by my viewpoint as mentioned above.

More than a month ago, in a philosophical gathering the discussion centered around the idea that when a society approaches a point where it must change, those who do not wish to change will clutch at something in the realm of ideas as a refuge. In America, the Neo-Thomist school in the Roman Catholic Church is an example. Then I suddenly thought of my own position on the battle line of ideas in China. Before the war, did not my writings on the new learning have a rather wide circulation? Those books of mine all had the word "new" in the title. As I see it now, the reason for saying new was only in relation to China's old philosophy. What I spoke of as the new learning was a reflection of the old philosophy of China, just as the Western Neo-Thomism is a reflection of the Thomism of the Middle Ages in the West. While it is a reflection, yet, sociologically speaking, it can be a sort of refuge for those who do not wish to change, because its social influence is to retard revolution.

Recently, I have come to think of truth as a system of living ideas. This truth can change its function according to the time and place, and still within each time and place remain truth. Truth is also growing; the fact that it is alive infers growth. When I really grasped this doctrine, I suddenly felt myself isolated, with nothing to rest upon. This feeling bears testimony to my former habit of thinking, which led me to believe that there must be an eternal unchangeable refuge. While I recognized that concrete things were changing, I dared not make a genuine change in my views. Of course, this harks back to the question of the viewpoint mentioned above. The reason I was able to write books which served as a support to those who were unwilling to change was that while I said I did not fear change intellectually, yet, emotionally, I also was unwilling to change. Thus my "writing of books and propounding of theories" hindered not merely my own progress but also that of others.

These matters must have been observed by others long ago, and led to some discussion. But I used to think that I was above class and that my ideas were above class, and I reckoned such discussion as not worth of rebuttal. In the spring of this year (1949), a Communist comrade said to me: "You are a student of philosophy, it is not easy for you to realize that the world is changing." At the time I felt this was quite untrue, for in my writings I had often spoken of changes. As I see it now, these criticisms were quite correct. Long before Pei-p'ing was liberated, I had determined to stay and wait for the turnover. Having determined to stay, I still did not look through some Communist books, to make some preparation in my ideas. As I see it now, that was very strange. Of course, this evil result stemmed from my still change-resistant psychology.

Formerly, I did not know that Communists had the practice of criticism and self-criticism; nor did I yet understand why this method would become a revolutionary weapon. Later, having participated in several initiations and having passed from the probationary to the regular member stage, I see that a member, before being admitted, must first successively be criticized and criticize himself. Only thus can he avoid carrying his "former stains" into the party. In the past few months, I have indulged in a little self-criticism, and come to see that the process is endless. People used to say:

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"Correcting books is like sweeping up leaves; it must be done over and over again. A person's faults are like errors in a book; as soon as discovered they must be eliminated; and each time the leaves are swept, a nice clean place is left."

Two students in the Ch'ing-hua philosophy department heard me say I was going to do some self-criticism and were so delighted they could not sleep, discussing how they would present their views to me. When they found out I was merely planning to write an article on self-criticism, not to practice it, they left without even discussing their ideas with me, another student told me. I must have had an attitude of "keeping aloof from folks." I thought I was very humble, but I was really very proud. I now see that one who does not "practice" self-criticism, but only "talks about" it, is quite ridiculous. How can one discuss self-criticism without practicing it first?

My view of philosophy has changed too. I used to think it had no concern with politics and society. The further it was from these subjects, the "purer" it was. It must have a purely theoretical system; the more "abstruse," the more "specialized." Because of this way of looking at things, I used to feel that from the philosophical standpoint, Marxism-Leninism was not "specialized" enough in its theory, and was too mixed up with politics and society. I now feel that this was looking through the little end of the horn, and that social changes have enabled me to bore my way out. Now I feel that philosophy's chief function is to change persons and to change the world.

In the spring of this year (1949) I had already determined to write several essays "explaining" Marxism-Leninism. As I see it now, such planning was a mistake. How can one write essays on the basis of superficial book learning? Furthermore, Marxism-Leninism is a "guide to action," and should be used for deciding social problems and in self-criticism. If anything is gained in these functions, that is really an exposition of Marxism-Leninism. To do otherwise, arguing back and forth with words, is "a regrettable and irreparable loss of mind."

I know that comparing the theories and methods of Marxism-Leninism in the reconstruction of men and society with the "self-culture" and "rule the empire" stuff of the old society, is like comparing the wisps of empirical medicine of old China with scientific medicine. Just as the latter is built up on physiology and pathology, Marxist-Leninist reconstruction is based on the laws of social development. Phrases and passages from the old sages count no more here than ancient herbal potions for the healing of society.

Criticism and self-criticism must stem from the actual living of the masses, rather than from the introspection of the old moralists in their quiet cloisters. The former is far more rigorous in its results, now that it is practiced by millions of Communists.

I feel that moral standards in society have risen; now the touchstone is "for people." Values have changed; many formerly prized things are now cast away. I myself regret words which were wrong, and also those right ones which proceeded from individualism or from the hero complex. Under the moral standards of the new society, all these come in for scrutiny and perhaps censure.

In short, I feel that in the new Communist-led society, all is developing upwards. I am doing that too. While I do not know how much progress I have made in the past year, at least I have made enough progress to become aware of my previous failure to progress. -- Feng Yu-lan

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